

News from Ed Markey

United States Congress

Massachusetts Seventh District

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 30, 2002

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NRC NEGLECTS SECURITY FOR DIRTY BOMB MATERIALS

Lawmaker warns that NRC failure to act poses unacceptable risk

WASHINGTON, D.C. --

Representative Edward J. Markey (D-MA), a senior Member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and sponsor of the Dirty Bomb Prevention Act, today released the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's (NRC's) response to his June 11, 2002 letter requesting information related to the security of irradiators, which are a sub-set of the 2 million radioactive sources in the U.S. Irradiators (which can contain millions of Curies of radiation) are found in large food and medical sterilization facilities, hospitals, and research institutions. 48 States possess at least one irradiator, 25 States have 10 or more irradiators, 13 States have 25 or more irradiators, 7 States have more than 50 irradiators, and 17 States have at least one irradiator that is greater than 1 million Curies.

"The NRC does not require background checks for personnel with access to these materials or the facilities in which they are stored, and has done nothing to permanently upgrade their security," said Rep. Markey. "This failure on the part of the NRC to take action almost a year after September 11 shows it has a blatant disregard for the unacceptable public health and safety risks a dirty bomb poses to America."

The NRC response indicates that:

- "Individuals with access to irradiators are not currently required by NRC to undergo criminal or security background checks... NRC does not currently require individuals making deliveries of products to be irradiated to undergo criminal or security background checks."
- Shipments to irradiation/sterilization facilities (which can contain millions of Curies of radioactive cobalt) are not required to be screened to ensure they do not contain hidden amounts of conventional explosives that could be detonated by the truck driver or remotely. Such a detonation could blow a hole in the walls/roof of the facility and disperse radioactive materials over a large area.
- While NRC has advised irradiator licensees to increase security measures, NRC Advisories are not legally binding, are not required to be complied with, and cannot be enforced [1]. The NRC has yet to issue Orders or promulgate a change in regulations that would ensure that security of these materials is upgraded, though it says it plans to do so in the future.
- Licensees are required to self-verify that no radioactive sources have been lost when sources are added to, removed from or moved, or at least every 3 years. However, self-shielded irradiators are only inspected by the NRC or the Agreement State every 3-5 years, and panoramic irradiators are inspected every 1-2 years. In the past 5 years, nearly 1500 radioactive sources have been reported lost or stolen in

the U.S., but less than half of them have been found.

- NRC has not begun studies on the risks and consequences of a terrorist attack on an irradiator facility.
- NRC dismissed one of the three dirty bomb scenarios raised by the Federation of American Scientists [2] involving the detonation of a single rod of cobalt obtained from a large food irradiation plant. The scenario was predicted to result in the contamination of 1000 square kilometers, with a 10% risk of death from cancer for residents living inside a 300-city block area for 40 years following the detonation. NRC's dismissal of the scenario was based primarily on the difficulty associated with locating the cobalt within the facility and removing it without receiving a lethal dose of radiation. However, NRC evidently did not consider the possibility that a terrorist might a) be currently employed at the facility since no background checks are required, b) be suicidal, and c) detonate the facility itself. Moreover, the NRC did not consider the possibility that the cobalt could be obtained from some other source. Just 2 years ago, 2 people died and 5 became seriously ill when an Egyptian farmer stumbled upon a 2.4 inch piece of radioactive cobalt that he found and stored at his home.

The Markey-Clinton Dirty Bomb Prevention Act, which would establish a special task force to recommend measures to improve security of dirty bomb materials and direct the NRC to adopt measures to implement the task force's recommendations, was recently approved as an amendment to the Nuclear Security Act by the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. In addition, last fall, nuclear security provisions co-authored by Rep. Markey were approved by the House of Representatives and are currently under consideration as part of the House-Senate conference on H.R. 4, the comprehensive energy policy bill.

"It is clear that both the House and the Senate have lost confidence in the NRC's ability and willingness to address these vital security issues," said Rep. Markey adding, "I think the prospects are looking increasingly favorable for the Congress to enact nuclear security legislation prior to adjournment in the Fall."

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